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## **Instilling the Sentiment: The Poetic Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Ralph Waldo Emerson did not leave behind himself a consistent philosophical system. His contribution to American, and not only American, philosophy and literature is of different nature. Irwin Edman (1951: v) in his introduction to *Emerson's Essays* writes that he does not read Emerson professionally. "For disclosures of the nature and signature of things," he says, "I prefer, on the whole, more explicit, more literal, and more analytic thinkers." Emerson indeed is neither explicit nor analytic, which is one of the reasons why he enjoys the reputation of a difficult philosopher. Still Edman (1951: v) admits that he does read Emerson, and he reads him because Emerson is "the thoughtful writer of prose which has, without any of the more patent devices of verse, the magical effects of poetry."

In certain respects, Emerson is a complete failure as a philosopher. This is the result of his open hostility towards systematic thinking. Emerson's aunt is recorded to have said that no Emerson "is capable of deep investigation or of long continued thought," which some consider "the profoundest comment on her nephew" (Buell 1975: 45).

A good illustration of Emerson's failure as a systematic thinker is his introduction to *Nature*. In his introduction Emerson (2006: I 5–6) sets out to clarify the basic terms employed in the treatise, most importantly the very term *nature*, which, as we all know, is capable of having manifold meanings. The most interesting passage is the last paragraph of the introduction, and it runs as follows:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses; – in its common and its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. *Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the river, the leaf. *Art*

is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world of the human mind, they do not vary the result.

Emerson's definition of nature is strangely circular. Nature is nature plus art ("both nature and art [...] must be ranked under this name, NATURE"). This is quite confusing, even though Emerson explains that this is not the same nature. He speaks of nature in the philosophical ("the NOT ME") and the common import ("essences unchanged by man"). And yet, for no apparent reason, graphically Emerson distinguishes at least three, and in some editions even four, different kinds of nature: there is Nature (with an initial capital), NATURE (in capitals), and (ordinary) nature. This is definitely more than is needed, especially that shortly afterwards he announces that anyway, he will use the word both in its philosophical and common sense. He claims that the difference between the two exists but it is so little that, in fact, it does not exist ("his [man's] operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world of the human mind, they do not vary the result"). Thus the seemingly solved problem of the circularity of Emerson's definition returns. His argument may be summarized as follows: Nature in the philosophical import equals nature in the common import plus art, but the art element is so insignificant that it can be, or even should be, disregarded, so Nature in the philosophical import equals nature in the common import. Or to put it even more concisely, Nature is nature. Such a definition is at best a tautology. Considering the fruits that it bore, Emerson's great analytical effort seems to have been wasted.

In the passage quoted above Emerson attempts some other definitions of nature, which are even more baffling. The tricky thing about Emerson is that he introduces entirely new ideas in the disguise of a paraphrase. Thus what in the text is presented as merely an elaboration of the original definition is, in fact, an entirely new logical proposition, standing in a very dubious relation to the previous one.

First nature is defined in contradistinction to the Soul ("Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul"), from which it follows that Nature is the universe bereft of the spiritual element. Nature equals the Universe minus the Soul. Then, at the beginning of the very next sentence, Emerson defines nature in contradistinction to human beings (Nature is "all that is separate from us"), only to reject this definition in the second part of the same

sentence ("all other men [...] must be ranked under this name, NATURE") and to define nature in contradistinction to the Self ("all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME"<sup>1</sup>). Emerson seems to be in two minds as far as other people are concerned. He cannot articulate his views clearly because his views are far from being clear.

Emerson's philosophy is haunted by the suspicion that man lives in the world of phantoms created by his own mind. In *Nature* he indicts solipsism in Chapter VII: "It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end. Then the heart resists it, because it balks the affections in denying substantive being to men and women" (2006: I 64). He struggles to transcend the duality between the soul and the world, the duality which he makes elsewhere the cornerstone of his philosophy. For he has proudly declared himself an idealist and

[i]dealism saith: matter is a phenomenon, not a substance. Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being and the evidence of the world's being. The one is perfect, the other, incapable of any assurance; the mind is a part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream, from which we may presently wake to the glories and certainties of day. (2006: I 64)

His doubts seem to be gaining the upper hand in the essay entitled "Friendship," where he declares:

I cannot deny it, O friend, that the vast shadow of the phenomenal includes thee also in its pied and painted immensity, – thee also, compared with whom all else is shadow. Thou art not Being, as Truth is, as Justice is, – thou art not my soul, but a picture and effigy of that. (2006: II 98)

And later he will add: "A friend therefore is a sort of paradox in nature. I who alone am, I who see nothing in nature whose existence I can affirm with equal evidence to my own, behold now the semblance of my being" (2006: II 205). Emerson (2006: III 61) is also the author of the saying: "Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real, perhaps they are," which is probably the most succinct presentation of his views on this matter. Emerson is a philosopher who keeps his philosophy in the state of constant doubt.

That is why Emerson's explanations usually do not explain anything, just the opposite, they only make the things more complicated. The introduction to *Nature* is a case in point. Emerson, as if realizing this, finally offers words of

<sup>1</sup> This could be an echo of Fichte's perplexing notion of the "Transcendental Ego." Still Emerson seems to ignore the difference between the transcendental and the ordinary ego.

comfort to his disturbed readers: "In inquires so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur." The weakness of this position is obvious; details do matter and should not be shoved aside that easily, just because they are inconvenient. But in his inability to explain, Emerson is similar to the Zen master from the following koan:

THE STUDENT Doko came to a Zen master, and said: "I am seeking the truth. In what state of mind should I train myself, so as to find it?"

Said the master, "There is no mind, so you cannot put it in any state. There is no truth, so you cannot train yourself for it."

"If there is no mind to train, and no truth to find, why do you have these monks gather before you every day to study Zen and train themselves for this study?"

"But I haven't an inch of room here," said the master, "so how could the monks gather? I have no tongue, so how could I call them together or teach them?"

"Oh, how can you lie like this?" asked Doko. "But if I have no tongue to talk to others, how can I lie to you?" asked the master. Then Doko said sadly, "I cannot follow you. I cannot understand you."

"I cannot understand myself," said the master. ("A Collection of Zen Koans")

This affinity might run deeper. Both Zen and Emerson's philosophy are animated by the spirit of rebellion; they are both iconoclastic. Even though Zen is commonly referred to as religion, it is a very unusual religious denomination as it rejects official creeds and religious dogmas. Considering this, it may actually be called an "anti-religion." Similarly, Emerson's philosophy may be described as an anti-philosophy. Emerson rejects the very principles of logical thinking.

The whole of *Nature* is actually a refutation of the definitions from the introduction. Emerson does present nature as something possessing spiritual characteristics. Nature is discussed as a source of Beauty, Language, and Discipline. He further undermines the validity of the initial statement on the structure of the universe ("the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul") by questioning the material existence of nature. As has been observed, his idealism verges upon solipsism. Emerson (2006: I 48) speculates that nature could be "the apocalypse of the mind," or an image painted "in the firmament of the soul." This would mean that man is not separate from nature but part of it (or that nature is part of him). In Chapter VII Emerson (2006: I 65) makes the following statement: "[T]hat spirit, that is, Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old."

Emerson rejects his analytical definitions for he finds them too restraining. He is much more himself when he announces in "History" that "nature is a mutable cloud which is always and never the same" (2006: II 14). He welcomes paradox and contradiction. In *Nature* Emerson makes a number of contradictory statements. He argues that nature is both the spirit and the matter, me and not me, me and other people, God and man, the object and the subject of perception, essences unchanged by man and essences changed by man. Nature is all this and much more; it is a great riddle. Solving this riddle would mean finding the answers to all important questions. Nature is the mysterious Over-soul, in which all opposites are reconciled. It is unity underlying the seeming diversity of the created world. For differences exist only on the surface. This is what the juxtaposition of the contradictory definitions of nature might imply. Definitions feed on differences; if differences are only seeming differences, and the true reality is an all pervading oneness, then to differentiate and to define is a sheer waste of time. Everything is everything. If one analyzes, one refuses to acknowledge this spiritual truth.

Emerson never analyzes, he synthesizes. He does not want to divide but to unite. Ultimately, he wants to transcend all petty differences and distinctions, and reach the oneness of the ideal world, the real world.

One of the greatest paradoxes of Emerson's philosophy is that this Platonic thinker inspired the philosophical tradition which is avowedly anti-Platonist and anti-metaphysical. And yet this is not an accident that such a philosopher as Frederick Nietzsche studied Emerson carefully and was deeply moved by his writing.<sup>2</sup> It may be true that all texts deconstruct themselves but still there are texts that deconstruct themselves more than others do. Emerson's essays belong to this category. Emerson's aim is incommensurate with his method. His language runs counter to his argument.

The problem has been already identified by Charles Feidelson, Jr (1962: 147),

What is extraordinary about Emerson's writings is the way in which the problems he tried to ignore rose up again to dog him, lending a richer texture and content to his work. His flagrant inconsistency and the paradoxicality that he could never exclude from his theory were the product of his encounter with the making of literature and

<sup>2</sup> For the account of Nietzsche's studies of Emerson see Thomas H. Brojber *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context. An Intellectual Biography* (University of Illinois Press 2008), where Emerson opens the list of the major philosophical influences on Nietzsche's thinking (22–25). For a more detailed comparison of the two philosophies see David Mikics's *The Romance of Individualism in Emerson and Nietzsche* (Ohio University Press 2003)

with the claims of diversity upon every concrete fact. What is even more important is the seminal effect of his point of view, or the kind of thinking illustrated by it: the way his facile generalizations, which were intended as philosophical answers, communicated a new set of questions to the literary mind. While he spoke of the world as two only in order to suggest how it might be one, he thereby acknowledged a duality which is no less real because it is conquered in each instant of poetic speech.

The Emersonian cosmic vision of unity-in-diversity is also, at the same time, the vision of diversity-in-unity. Consider the following passage from Emerson's journal,

The metamorphosis of Nature shows itself in nothing more than this that there is no word in our language that cannot become typical to us of Nature by giving it emphasis. The world is a Dancer; it is a Rosary; it is a Torrent; it is a Boat; a mist; a Spider's Snare; it is what you will; and the metaphor will hold, & will give the imagination keen pleasure. Swifter than light the world converts into that thing you name.  
(1960: VIII 23; qtd. in Buell 1975: 170)

Feidelson (qtd. in Buell 1975: 170) sees this passage as "a spontaneous dance of self-determining and autonomous symbols" that leads to "a literary anarchy." Emerson abandons logical connectives, producing thus a volley of images. As Feidelson (1962: 151) notices, "The house of Rhetoric is built without logical mortar." There is definitely more diversity than unity to this catalogue. The world is at the same time a dancer, rosary, torrent, boat, mist, and spider's snare. As these images flash before our eyes, we cannot help but conclude that the world is constantly in the state of becoming. Nothing is stable, nothing is predetermined, everything changes. The world is a myriad of perceptions, and the truth, if there is such a thing as the truth, is bound to be subjective – it depends on the perceiver. The truth is what you will. The poet – the sayer creates the truth by creating metaphors. The truth is made rather than discovered; the world obediently converts into the thing the poet names, as if acknowledging the superiority of the poet's will. I wouldn't say that this is what the text implies; I'd say that this is what it explicitly states, even though it does not sound like Emerson the Metaphysician, or even Emerson the Idealist. It sounds very much like Nietzsche, the Prophet of Will and Becoming. Passages like this one, Nietzsche might have copied verbatim from Emerson.

Emerson is frequently caught arguing against his professed idealism. This is on the one hand due to a certain contradiction in his views, and on the other due to the language that he uses, and also his attitude towards language in general. Relativism is a corollary of subjectivity, which is in turn a corollary of

individualism. Thus it is small wonder that since Emerson argues for extreme individualism, sometimes he finds himself arguing for relativism, including moral relativism. In "Self-reliance" he declares, "[I]f I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil.' No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it" (2006: II 51). Emerson empowers the individual by giving him the right to decide what is right and wrong, and what is true and false. For Emerson the truth is not something that emerges in the process of logical argumentation. It is rather like a flash of the lightning. You see it, and you know. Hence in *Nature* he states, "Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence" (2006: I 5). A statement like this makes the whole philosophy and philosophizing redundant. We are reminded of Swift's intelligent horses, who laughed when Gulliver tried to explain to them human systems of natural philosophy (1967: 315). When the truth is obvious, it is obvious, and there is no need to write about it. Emerson's proposition will be echoed in Whitman's poetry. The speaker of "Song of Myself" will boldly state, "And what I assume you shall assume" (1955: 49).

Emerson always perceived himself more as a poet than a philosopher. In the letter to his future second wife Lydia Jackson, he writes, "I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature & vocation" (2003: 24). As a poet, he believes that language is something more than a merely passive tool that one uses to describe what is and what is not. He empowers language along with the individual. The poet – the sayer is capable of deciding what is true and what is false. He can do so as long as his metaphors influence people's hearts. Thus truth appears to be a function of language. Obviously, this is not what Emerson explicitly says, but what he does say comes very close to it. The beginning of "Self-Reliance" is a very lucid presentation of the program of Emerson's poetic philosophy:

I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. Always the soul hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be universal sense. (2006: II 46)

And this is why Emerson neither explains nor analyzes, but stuns and inspires. Emerson, a former preacher, appeals to his readers' emotions rather than the

rational faculty. The strength of his argument lies in the strength of his images and metaphors.

It has been argued that Emerson's style is a natural extension of his metaphysical project. Emerson believes "that there is no fact in nature that does not carry the whole sense of nature," that "the entire system of things gets represented in every particle" (Feidelson 1962: 151), and that all nature is a visible garment for the spiritual truth. Thus he validates his use of symbol and synecdoche. He also says that nature is "one thing and the other thing, in the same time," justifying his reliance on metaphor (Feidelson 1962: 151). And since metaphor points to a secret similarity between two seemingly dissimilar objects, all these tropes may be viewed as means of reinforcing the message of the all pervading oneness. And yet at the same time they resist and subvert this message. Both metaphor and symbol tend to multiply the meanings, approaching dangerously the trope of irony. They always contain a certain surplus of meaning and suggest the inexpressible other, for which there is no room in the perfectly monistic system.

In this way Emerson comes very close to Nietzsche's ideal discourse, the discourse which "seduces, tempts, forces, overturns." This is, as Nietzsche (1998: 149) says, the discourse of "born enemies of logic and straight lines, desirous of the foreign, the exotic, the monstrous, the crooked, and the self-contradictory."

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